

“So, what brings you back to our neck of the woods, James?” asked Adeline Peterson from the front seat of the shuttle van as they meandered along highway 504 on their way to the put in of the day’s whitewater run.

James Alton stared out the window, fully engrossed in the scenery he’d not seen for at least a year. Without looking up he said, “The magazine sent me up to do a piece. They told me to pick a river, so I figured the Toutle would be as good as any. Besides, it’s River Rat Saturday. I couldn’t think of any better inspiration than this place or this lot.”

“Oh? Is this a single piece, or part of a spread like last time?” asked Adeline.

“Part of a larger piece called the *Jewels of the Majestic Pacific Northwest*,” replied James, still looking out the window.

“Cool, can’t wait to read it,” said Adeline trying to catch his attention. When he didn’t turn to look at her, she shot Joe Wilson a questioning look.

Joe nodded and said tapping James on the shoulder, “So, you gonna show us anything new today?”

“Hmm? Oh, sorry man, I was off in la-la land. Uh, something new today? What like a different route through Hollywood rapid?”

“Uh, sure I guess so.”

Completely missing his friend’s skeptical look, James said, “Well, seeing as most of you are running boats, it might be kinda difficult. But I think I know of a couple of new spots.”

“Don’t worry Jimmy,” said Riley Daniels from the back seat, “We’ll just watch what you do and make sure we don’t the same.”

Before James had a chance to give a witty rejoinder, Adeline interrupted. “Ok guys, we’re finally here,” she said, pulling to the side of the road.

James stepped out of the van and stretched. Pops and clicks heralded the protestation of his long sinuous muscles on his five-foot-nine-inch frame in response to the long drive. He looked around, taking in this old familiar sites and smells of his home. “Man it feels *great* to be back,” he said to no one in particular.

Over the next twenty minutes, the group worked quickly to get all the boats down to the bank, eager to get out on the water. The whispering through the tall pine trees lining the river, in conjunction with the sound of the water was like a balm to him, stripping away the shouts and arguments of the previous weeks, until all he heard was that old familiar sounds of the river.

James stood on the bank looking down at the deep green of the water sensing it calling out beckoning him to her chilly embrace. It was a call he could not, nor *would* not resist. He reached down and brought up a handful of the frigid Toutle river and splashed himself in the face, then said, “Bless me Mother Gaia, and keep me safe in thine embrace.”

Beside him, a resounding chorus of, “AMEN!” rang out as his fellow floaters began to shove

off.

With the checks on his equipment complete, James gave one good shove from the bank and was out in the current. He made a couple of strokes to the far side of the river where he waited out the other boaters in the group to launch, joined a couple of minutes later by Joe.

They both sat in silence for a moment when Joe gave James a sidelong glance, “Really glad you could make it up here this weekend man. I was afraid you were gonna miss it.”

“I wouldn't have missed this world man,” said James, holding out his hands. “A free trip home to hang with my peeps? Never!”

Joe frowned, catching the ghost of an expression of melancholy in James' eyes. “Everything ok man?” Joe asked. At James' quizzical expression, Joe continued, “You've got this look, like something's gnawing at your edges.”

James sighed. “That obvious huh?” At Joe's single nod, James added, “Megan and I've seemed to hit a rough patch lately. Not sure what's going on, but she been more, I dunno, distant, I guess.”

“Well, she does travel a ton, right?” asked Joe.

“Yeah, but I don't know if that's it though. It's hard to put a finger on it. All I know is we've been fighting a lot more as of late, and none of my normal charms are working.”

Joe gave his friend a sympathetic look and patted him on the shoulder. “Well, maybe this is what the doctor ordered, eh? Some time away, to get your head cleared... and there's nothing quite like some good ol' rapid action to do just that.”

James watched the last of the party launch. He pointed his chin to the back of the line of boats and said to Joe, “Mind doing the sweep for the first part of it?” Joe gave a slight nod of assent as he held station, waiting for the group to pass. With a powerful pull of his paddle, James shot to the front where he assumed his position at the head of the flotilla.

“Snag on the left,” said James over his shoulder, doing his best to note any potential issues ahead. It wasn't long though, as familiar sites drifted by before James' thoughts drifted back to Megan. *I give her everything a person could want, what the hell does she want from me?* he wondered. The thought caused him to grind his teeth in frustration. He became aware of a tightening sensation in his limbs as he paddled brought on by a sudden sense of restlessness. *I gotta hit some white water, quick if I'm gonna get my mind back in the game. C'mon Jimmy, get her out of your head.*

James craned his neck, straining to get a look at the first set of rapids ahead, when he heard, or rather, felt his cell phone buzz somewhere in his drysuit. *Great, what perfect timing,* he mused in annoyance. The buzz finally abated but began again in earnest seconds later, almost as if whoever was calling knew he was about to tackle a class four. As if on cue, James spotted the tell-tale signs of the first set of rapids and nodded. These weren't so tough to negotiate, but there was one rock that was hidden towards the middle of the set that could pose a problem for the

other boaters, and he needed to be able to concentrate on that spot to keep an eye out for any potential danger.

The phone went off again, its buzzing feeding his ever-growing agitation just as James slid past the submerged rock and the accompanying raft-eating hole. He skirted left of the standing wave, narrowly missing a low-hanging branch. A moment's panic gripped him when he noticed the tug of current from a nearby hydraulic, but it quickly abated as he dug deep and pulled ahead. Within minutes, he was through the set and back in a calm pocket of water, watching his companions.

Having skirted the first set, Adeline came to a halt next to James in the calm water in time to see James shaking his head at the buzzing sound emanating from his dry suit.

At Adeline's quizzical look, James said, "The damned thing has been going off since above that rapid," said James in an exasperated tone.

"Perhaps it's urgent."

"Yeah, well, I really can't get to it unless I stop and take off my dry suit. Whoever it is, they can wait," said James with finality.

Joe had come up to them at this point and was shaking his head at James, "Man, what happened back there?"

"Got distracted," said James, simply. "I was just telling Adeline that my damned cell phone keeps going off, and it was doing so when that hydraulic got a hold of me."

"Everything other than that ok?" asked Joe.

"Yeah, I really should just turn the damned thing off, though, in truth, I really didn't think I'd get signal out here," said James. "When we pull over for lunch, I'll turn it off then."

The three kayakers hurried to catch up with the group. As he passed the other boaters, he saw that Paul Braddock was trying to get his attention.

"Looks like there's a snag up near Coffee Pot rapid James. How do you want to handle it?" he asked, as James came alongside his boat.

"Are you comfortable running the left-hand line?" asked James.

Paul stood up and craned his neck for a better look. "Yeah, I think I can make it. Perhaps you can hang back and I'll run it, and then give the all clear once I get a good look."

James nodded his assent and pulled over to another eddy. He watched Paul make his way through the rapid. As he suspected, the going would be fairly straightforward for the rest of the group, so he waved them on, signaling them to follow Paul's line. When the last of them had gone by, James noted that Joe hadn't run yet. He scanned the river until he spotted Joe over on river left, eddied out above the tumultuous rapid known as Coffee Pot. Joe waved to him and

pointed at the line he intended to take. James nodded and gave the thumbs up.

Joe entered the rapid, making quick work of it, but James could see that he had opted to skirt to the left of the big rock on the right-hand side. James scoffed at his friend, *C'mon ya big BABY!* he mused, thinking that Joe wimped out at the last moment. *Ok, move aside and let the master show you how to get it done,* thought James, his impetuous nature taking over as he eyed the line he planned to take. His mind made up, James set up his line and paddled forward, aiming for the center of the line that would go right over the center of the rock.

~~~~~

Below the rapid Joe pulled off into a back eddy near the bank just downstream. He turned in time to catch James' descent into the top of the rapid, expecting his friend to follow his line. To do otherwise would have been suicide as it was evident by the downed tree that was just below the big rock. Unfortunately, James entered the rapid from the right-hand side instead of the left. He didn't see the danger until he was already on top of it.

Joe's heart stopped while he watched in horror, as his friend rode over the top of the rock and plummeted down into the backwash caused by the fallen tree. The last thing Joe saw was the look of terror in James' ice blue eyes as his kayak slammed into the tree, momentarily wedging it between a branch and the rock. It remained suspended for only a moment before the force of the water violently ripped the kayak down, plunging it into the backwash.

"JIMMY!!!" screamed Joe in sheer panic, unable to do anything. Joe scowled as he scanned his surroundings, seeing only thirty-foot-high cliff walls on both sides. He supposed he could paddle ahead and hike back, but the only place he knew of was downriver about a quarter of a mile. His mind raced, as he tried to think of the best way to reach his friend.

"JAMES? JOE!" came the distant voice of Paul Braddock.

"HERE, PAUL! JIMMY WENT DOWN!" Joe shouted back, though he wasn't sure Paul heard him.

A minute had passed since James went under. Joe glanced back and forth, searching desperately for any sign of his friend. Something yellow caught his attention as it came shooting out from the backwash. It was James' paddle. Joe's heart rose for a moment when he spied James' kayak floating lazily under the surface but sank again when James was nowhere to be seen.

"JOE!" yelled Adeline. She had come from behind a large boulder just down river.

"Addy, you have to get to Paul and get him to hike back up. James got eaten by Coffee Pot!" yelled Joe. She gave one quick nod in understanding, turned, and paddled out of site.

Two and half minutes turned into three minutes, and then four.

“JAMES!” screamed Joe once more in vain, desperate for *any* sign of his friend. Catching sight of James' kayak again, Joe made ready to go and retrieve it, when something caught his eye, something green just under the surface of the water. It *had* to be him. Joe strained and pulled, fighting against the current. It battered and shoved at his kayak threatening to slam it against the rock, but Joe dug deep, inching himself forward.

Joe craned his neck desperately trying to find the object he'd seen moments ago. He didn't see anything. He was about to head downstream when the object appeared again. It *was* James. Commending his own soul to God, Joe gave one good push with his paddle and was able to turn himself around and take off after James.

He'd come up on him right as the current split around another large boulder in the middle of the river. *If I don't reach him in time, he'll be caught against the rock* thought Joe. He made a split second decision, paddling over the top of his friend to get downriver of him. He swung his kayak around and jammed the paddle into the water in hoping he could reach James' life jacket. On the second try, the blade caught. He pulled with the last of his strength and was rewarded with the site of James' life jacket breaching the surface. Joe threw himself out of his own boat and grabbed for his friend.

With his attention so focused on James, Joe couldn't tell how far downriver they'd gone. Only when he the sudden sensation of being struck in the head by something, did he look up in surprise to see his friends. The shock abated immediately as the familiar rasp of the safety line dragged across his torso. He had one hand under James' arm, keeping his head out of the water, while the other clutched the rope with an iron grip.

“HE'S GOT HIM!” shouted Adeline. “Pull you guys!”

Adeline was at Joe's side instantly, working feverishly to position her kayak to allow Joe to pull James on to it. After a couple of minutes, they had secured him well enough to the front of her boat, and she paddled the three of them over to shore.

Adeline was out of her boat in seconds and administering CPR to James. “C'mon Jimmy,” she said in a low, but steady voice. “Come back to us.”

Joe reached out, taking James' lifeless hand in his, feeling for a pulse. “I think...” he said, closing his eyes. “Yes, I've got a pulse.” Minutes passed with little reaction from James. He would breathe once or twice, but then not respond at all. Joe and Adeline redoubled their efforts, grim determination showing in their faces as they fought to bring any sign of life back to their fallen friend.

James finally came to after what seemed like minutes of unconsciousness. He coughed and sputtered water from his lungs, as he took in huge gulps of air.

“Oh thank you GOD!” said Adeline, sitting back on her knees and sighing heavily.

At the sound of Adeline's exclamation, James slowly opened his eyes. His remained

unfocused, but his gaze eventually settled on the dour countenances of Joe and Adeline. “Hey guys,” he said with a raspy voice. “Where am I?” he asked, looking around trying to get his bearings.

“Below Coffee Pot Jimmy, you got eaten,” said Joe in a sober voice.

“Oh my GOD!” said James, now starting to recall the past twenty minutes. “I remember seeing that *tree* looming up out of the spray under the rock. Then there was a loud bang and I remember getting wedged in between the tree and the boulder. After that, things went really fast, and I remember looking up at the sky before I was engulfed. The last thing I remember was trying to get out of my cockpit, but then everything went black.”

Joe gave him a long, hard, look. “Dude, what in *the HELL* were you thinking? Didn't you see me go wide of the rock?”

James stared back at his friend, looking slightly defensive. “Yeah, I did Joe, but I guess I figured that you got cold feet. I mean, I couldn't see the tree from where I was.”

“Jimmy, we *all* know you have a horrible habit of shooting from the hip,” said Adeline who spoke up for the first time.

“What are you talking about Addy?” asked James indignantly.

“I *mean*, you never stop to think about these kinds of things, you know? You just, go for it!” She crossed her arms for effect.

“Which is fine for some things, but this could have killed you... HELL, it *did* kill you, albeit for a few minutes man!” interrupted Joe.

James shut his eyes and leaned his head back. “You're right guys. I'm really sorry. I just...” He trailed off, “I'd just been playing the argument that I'd had with Megan over and over in my head, and when I saw Coffee Pot, I just sort of went on autopilot, you know?”

As if on cue, James' cell phone went off, its unrelenting buzz sounding like a maddened hornet. Joe and Adeline gave James a quizzical look before the three of them broke out in a quiet laugh, the tension sliding away from the moment like a receding tide.

James fumbled inside of his dry suit and produced his phone, somewhat shocked that it still worked, and had a signal. “Wow, three bars out here, who'd have thunk,” he said. The message on the display read *Missed call from Megan*. He raised one eyebrow looking at the phone and then at Joe and Adeline. The call log displayed fifteen missed calls from Megan, and five text messages which gave varying versions of the same message; CALL ME ASAP!!!! He dialed her number, still surprised that he had any signal, and waited.

“Jamie? Is that you?”

“Yeah sweetheart, what's up? Why all of the messages and phone calls? Is everything ok?” he asked, trying to put an air of calm in his voice. Joe and Adeline suddenly realized that they

were eavesdropping on the call, and awkwardly looked away.

“...Anyway, I went to the doctor yesterday...”

“Yeah?” said James, his voice going up in pitch.

“Jamie... I'm pregnant.”

His eyes went wide, as his face returned to the grayish pallor that it had been just minutes before. “Uhhh, WOW... really? You and me?” At this, Joe and Adeline turned abruptly to see James staring wide-eyed in disbelief. “Wow, that's FANTASTIC!” a wide grin now displayed on his face. “Listen, honey, I'm on the river still, and we've gotta catch up to the group.” He lingered for another moment before he put down the phone and stared at the water rushing by in disbelief.

“What is it Jimmy?” asked Joe, “Everything ok?”

James looked up at his friends and announced without fanfare, “I'm gonna be a dad, you guys....” He trailed off, “...I *died* just a few minutes ago. Holy GOD!”

Joe smiled momentarily, but then looked serious, and then started to chortle.

It was James' turn to give the quizzical look. “What?” he said. Joe looked down, and then at Adeline before he fixed his gaze on James.

“I hate to say it my friend, but I guess this changes *everything*, which is to say, I bet you're gonna start thinking twice before you go taking that blind leap anymore.”

End